You Don't Have to Do it All

At the parent sessions I have done at workshops, institutes, and seminars, I usually ask parents to write their questions and concerns on note cards. In this fairly anonymous format, I tell them that I'm particularly interested in the concerns they are afraid to bring up with their regular teachers, other parents, or perhaps even their spouses. As I've read these questions aloud over the years, I've watched hundreds of parent faces smile nervously in recognition when I read questions such as "Why is it that when I ask my child to repeat something, he sighs like I've just asked him to do something totally impossible?" I've also seen those same faces begin to relax when they discover that they are not alone in their struggles.

I have listened to the concerns of parents in other ways as well–comments between classes, cafeteria line questions, and discussions while driving me to and from airports. And this is what I've discovered: parents worry.

So I want to get two things out of the way, right away.

First of all, your child doesn't need for you to be a perfect parent. I like the way the British pediatrician D.W. Winnicott put it: every child needs an "ordinary devoted" parent. And a parent's anxiety about being a *perfect* parent isn't a substitute for this ordinary devotion that every child needs. To Winnicott's ideas, I add the following: even when practicing an instrument with your child, perfection is still not required. However, as with parenting in general, your consistent presence is important.

If you're like most of the parents I have worked with over the past twenty years–and I'm sure you are–you want to know how to practice with your child in ways that maximize your usefulness and minimize your interference. This book is here to help you do that. In ordinary ways.

Here's the second thing to get out of the way: you don't have to read this entire book for it to be helpful or for it to make sense. It's not like a series of math courses in which you can't take algebra because you missed the class on addition. You're a parent. I know you're busy.

Of course, if you *want* to read this book cover to cover, you may. You could also use it as a reference book, reading just the sections that address your immediate needs. Or use it as a daily dose, reading one or two sections a day before starting practice. Or use it as a textbook, reading just the portions your teacher assigns.

You may find yourself reading a chapter one day, a small section three weeks later, and the rest of the book in six months. Many sections have cross-references, which allow you to hop around the book as your needs and interests dictate. Or you can just ignore the cross-references altogether. My hope is that you find a way to make the book useful for *you*.

I've organized this book into "neighborhoods." Each chapter has several separate sections, or "blocks," within those neighborhoods. Now you know why the table of contents looks like a subway map.

As you make your way through the book, you'll discover that many of the same concepts and themes keep reappearing. That's by design. Just as it's handy to have a neighborhood store where you can grab a quick loaf of bread, it's important to have the staples of practice where you need them. That's why they're all over the book. For example, all of the chapters reflect a common set of concerns and values that are difficult to exhaust, such as how to make practices both pleasant and productive. Each chapter is also unique. Every neighborhood has a place to grab a jug of milk; but not every neighborhood has a place to buy a sheet of birch plywood.

The idea that "repetition is the heart of learning" is one of the most important ideas I picked up during the year I studied with Shin'ichi Suzuki, founder of the Suzuki Method™. He constantly cycled through the basics of playing the violin–something his teaching was famous for–and in the process I came to understand the importance and richness of these basics. I believe that the staples in this book, which come from a variety of disciplines, not just music, are at the heart of practicing any instrument with your child. Actually, they are more than staples. I think of them as soul food.

You Are Unique–And So Are Your Challenges

Written in calligraphy and simply framed, the words "Monotony is the enemy of music," hung in Shin'ichi Suzuki's studio, and he referred to them often when our playing got, well, *boring*. Sometimes he read the words out loud himself. Sometimes he had us read them out loud. And sometimes he just pointed.

Suzuki was also quite fond of something else the Spanish cellist Pablo Casals once said:

> Each second we live is a new and unique moment of the universe, a moment that never was before and will never be again. And what do we teach our children? We teach them that two and two make four, and that Paris is the capital of France. When will we also teach them what they are? We should say to each of them: Do you know what you are? You are a marvel. You are unique. In all of the world there is no other child exactly like you. In the millions of years that have passed there has never been another child like you. And look at your body–what a wonder it is! Your legs, your arms, your cunning fingers, the way you move! You may become a Shakespeare, a Michelangelo, a Beethoven. You have the capacity for anything. Yes, you are a marvel.

I think it's helpful for every parent to understand something similar: *there is no other parent in the world quite like you*. Of all of the parents around you, none is able to care about your child the way you do. As a parent, you are unique. And you and the child you happen to be practicing with at any moment make a unique combination. In all the years that have passed, there has never been another parent just like you. There has never been a relationship just like your relationship with the child you practice with. (If you have more than one child, of course, you have more than one unique relationship.)

There is not one single way to be a parent, just as there isn't a single way to be a student–or a teacher, for that matter. Because of my respect for the uniqueness of each parent and his or her situation in life, it is impossible for me (or anyone else, in my opinion) to write a manual that tells you exactly what to do in each and every practice situation you face. Without a manual to consult, you're left with learning how to assess the situation as you go.

I like to think of daily practicing–and much of parenting in general–as a journey in which you come upon one yellow light after another. While red and green lights are pretty clear-cut –red means stop, green means go– a yellow light means that the driver has to check out the traffic conditions and make a decision in a split second. You've got more time when you're practicing, but still, you're facing a yellow light if you tell your child to play "Lightly Row" and "French Folk Song" comes out instead. Your reaction is likely to vary from that of another parent. Another parent might decide that it's important for the child to develop an awareness of directions, and stop the child immediately. You, on the other hand, knowing that your child is usually pretty good at following directions but currently has a distracting paper cut, may be grateful that anything at all came out of the instrument. So you simply point out that the last note was particularly lovely. Both of these reactions are appropriate. As the driver, you're the one who must decide.

A professional (such as myself) who lives outside of your unique traffic patterns can offer you a kind of "driver's ed."–information and knowledge that will enrich your understanding and skills. But I can't predict the specifics you'll encounter. That's why the idea that practice happens during a yellow light is one of the central themes of this book. There's a yellow light on the cover, and I like to think of the gray circles that surround the section numbers as yellow lights. I encourage you to take whatever enrichment you get from this book to that string of yellow lights you and your child approach during your daily practices.

Even though each parent/child relationship is unique, it's still important to teach children basic facts that *aren't* unique. They do need to know that $1 + 1 = 2$ and that Paris is the capital of France. As important as these facts are, however, it is equally important that we find opportunities

to teach them in ways that preserve the uniqueness of each child. One of those ways is by recognizing the uniqueness of each parent. I don't expect that this book will make all parents practice exactly alike. My aim is to help you develop basic skills, such as listening to your child's feelings, listening to your *own* feelings, and doing what you can to enjoy the journey of learning. The way you and your parent colleagues put those skills into practice will be different, perhaps just subtly. That's o.k. You're unique.

The Dirt that Lettuce Grows in Isn't Bad

After three days in the parent discussion group I was leading, the silent father finally spoke:

"I've been listening to all of the questions people are asking about practicing, and they really don't have anything to do with music–it seems like they're all about how you're getting along."

Bingo. In order to be effective, parents don't generally practice with their children over the phone, through e-mail, via fax, or even by shouting instructions from another room. Practicing happens in a very close–often intense–relationship. When the emotional environment of this relationship gets either too hot or too cold, practicing gets more difficult, just as it would if the physical environment went to one extreme or the other.

One way this upbeat book is here to help you is by acknowledging the darker, coarser side of the practicing relationship. This book understands that even though few things are more annoying than biting into a piece of dirty lettuce, lettuce actually grows in dirt. The dirt doesn't make the lettuce bad. Similarly, relationships often grow in conflict. The presence of conflict doesn't necessarily indicate that the relationship is bad.

Any close relationship is likely to have its share of conflict. People don't tell a librarian that they found a book out of place the same way they tell their spouse about, say, finding the remote in the refrigerator. Again. It's not the absence of conflict that determines the health of a relationship, but the way in which the conflict is acknowledged, managed, and–everyone hopes–eventually worked through.

I think of the conflicting, gritty moments of practice as a signal, not a report card. I hope that this book can help you determine whether a specific signal you're getting in your practice indicates that real work is happening–and you should keep at it–or that it's time to make some changes. Grittier moments don't mean that you, the parent, are being bad and need to be scolded. What you probably need are lots of ideas for how to make your practices more positive, so that your child doesn't end up overwhelmed with conflict, because just as dumping a truckload of dirt on a sprout prevents it from growing, too much conflict can suffocate a child. Still, when parents and children work through these rougher moments together, children can and do absorb the emotional nutrients that they contain.

At the outset of lessons, however, neither parent nor child counted on the struggles that can often come between them during practices. First lessons often start after parents and children have seen other children performing–or perhaps even playing fun games in a group class. The parent-child duo takes up an instrument with beautiful images of working together happily to produce delightful sounds. There's usually a honeymoon period, but before long, parents begin to realize that the work of practicing resembles gardening with your bare hands more than arranging fresh flowers in a vase. (And don't be fooled: even the parents who appear to have practices as graceful as ikebana also run into a thorn now and then.)

An important truth from gardeners can help parents who practice with their children: you can't tug on a plant to make it grow. You have to trust the process. But there's nothing wrong with fertilizing, watering, and generally caring for a plant. That's what gardeners do. Parents need to do it as well. In the process of tending beautiful flowers and nutritious vegetables, gardeners also encounter weeds. And pests. They also get some dirt under their fingernails. In their own way, so will parents.

I know about this grit in the practice relationship because of the kinds of questions parents have asked me over the years. The most common parental concerns have to do with conflicts during practice. A cloud of disappointment and confusion commonly goes along with these questions. Parents expected that there would be some work involved in practicing, but they didn't expect to come into contact with so much abrasiveness.

Sure, there's more to their practices than conflict, and parents want to know more than just how to avoid it. They want to know if they are practicing in a way that helps their children develop musical skills, along with ownership, responsibility, and rising to expectations. Still, the questions about resistance and struggle–conflict–are the most prominent.

At the core of all these questions is one fundamental question: "Am I a good parent?" It's no wonder that this core question is there. Parents have been entrusted not only with caring for their children physically, but also with nurturing their children's emotional and moral development. The stakes are high. Of *course* parents worry about whether or not they're doing the right thing.

One source of the worry is the fact that parents rarely get feedback. Parents lack what most important occupations have: a supervisor, someone who monitors what they're doing and might even offer a "Yes-that's-it" or "How-about-giving-this-a-whirl?"

A parent's own background may not provide much assistance either. Many parents who practice with their children didn't grow up that way themselves. They either didn't study music at all or they practiced alone. Those who did grow up practicing with their parents know that it was helpful, but they may want to spare their children some of the difficulties they had, so they don't want to do it the same way. Or they are somewhat baffled when they find out that their children aren't the way they themselves were as children. They feel stuck.

Your friends and parent-colleagues may sometimes have helpful ideas, but they don't have *your* child. Besides, they're not *you*. The more I think about how little feedback parents get, the more I realize that asking other parents "What piece is your child on?" is not always the adult version of the sandbox boast "My Dad's Bigger Than Yours." Instead, it's often merely a means of seeking reassurance. On the inside the parent is calculating: "Let's see...if your child and my child started lessons at about the same time and now we're more or less on the same piece...I must be doing an o.k. job as a parent." But gauging parent effectiveness this way is about as accurate as measuring the humidity with a plastic fork.

There's one more little snag: spouses don't always agree about what to do.

Teachers want to help out, but parents usually have to wait a week between lessons–which can leave you worried about the prospect of facing five more practices like the one you just had. Then, unfortunately, when you parents finally do get to a lesson, we teachers are often limited in our ability to comment on the practice relationship. Partly we are limited because the many other things we have to accomplish during a lesson usually win the battle for our attention.

We teachers are also limited because the quality of the child's playing and the rate of its growth are often our usual criteria for determining whether or not the parent is doing an adequate job. If progress on the instrument seems to be going along well, we often don't stop and ask how the practicing is going. The quality of a student's playing, however, is not always an accurate representation of the quality of the parent-child relationship during practice. It is possible for a child to play really well and have wonderful, nurturing, supportive parents. It is also possible for a child to have less than stellar musical skills and *still* have wonderful nurturing, and supportive parents. Just because a child is playing well at lessons doesn't mean a parent isn't struggling and worrying at home.

What to do? Just remember that you're not a bad parent if your child doesn't do everything perfectly. You might even want to remind yourself that good doctors, even *great* doctors, have patients who die. I'll admit that it's a grim comparison, but my point is that not everything is under your control, no matter how loving or caring you are. While you do have the enormous responsibility of giving your child the best you can give during your daily practice sessions–and I realize that your best will fluctuate from day to day–you alone are not responsible for the way your child plays. You do, however, have total responsibility for how you, yourself, behave during practice. It's a colossal responsibility, and this book is here to help you.

Through daily practice–spending time in the garden–you'll begin to see it more and more closely. This awareness of your garden will help you know what it needs to help it grow.